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# VIEWPOINT

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## SOCIAL REFORM AND OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGE

S. T. Kimbrough, Jr.

The years of social revolution in America for more than a decade have signalled the church's apathy and negligence as pertains to social justice. The church had often waited and silently abided while others, even non-Christians like a Gandhi, lived out the discipline of love that heals human need and sorrow, or while other organizations (sometimes government agencies) did the work of the church.

It is not unusual that much of the leadership of the church has reacted thoughtfully to the lack of social equilibrium in our time. Having been slapped in the face by a scolding culture which wears the marks of the church's ineffectiveness, seminaries and pulpits have been flooded by protagonists of social reform. Students and faculties, as well as some local parishes, have produced a new "paper church" of high sounding resolutions and occasional involvement in programs of social reform. Some ministers have become actively engaged in governmental economic and social programs. They have picketed, protested, and preached in behalf of the "new" social gospel.

One may criticize such churchmen, if he wishes, for jumping on the bandwagon of the humanitarian programs of the government and for stumping the states in behalf of social reform, but then one remembers that the church had hardly a bandwagon to jump on--few programs of her own.

Even with all the good that has been accomplished, and it is much, the church and its ministry have suffered. Many churches have faced absentee ministries--pastors so busily engaged in the crusade of justice beyond the bounds of their own parishes that they have been unjust stewards over their ministries in their immediate communities.

The church faces the possibility of fostering a gospel of bland humanitarianism unless a cruciform for the ministry can be discovered--a ministry with the cross of Christ at its center which becomes a paradigm for the minister's life and work among his people. This is a ministry wherein the man of God bears the cross of going into the homes of those he serves, and sometimes those not officially on his parish roll--finding out their needs--and seeking to personally confront those who uphold any system of injustice with the significance and demands of the cross event. This is a task to be fulfilled with all the sensitivity, frankness, and gentleness that a cruciform ministry requires. The cross breaks barriers of injustice more effectively than eloquent effusions on



the evils of our time, if it is actually the form of one's ministry. God's man may have to sacrifice fanfare and publicity in order to change, actually re-orient, the life of just one human being while on this earth.

The cruciform of the ministry is hardly enough in any age, for theory without content is hypocrisy. What then is to be the content of the church's social message? If the church has felt threatened by her apathy to social injustice, it is in part because she has been ignorant of and unresponsive to her biblical heritage. While some are building the arks of social reform to float away in, it would be well to remember that celebrated Ark of long ago which had in it something with which to start life over again. Could it be that the very content and motivation of that which some churchmen have thought could be found only in a variety of humanitarian programs outside the church, can be found within her own heritage?--better yet, the foundation for a movement from within--outward?

A time for spade work into our biblical heritage is imperative if the church is going to be more than a mouthpiece for most any kind of humanitarian ejaculation that sounds novel and esoteric enough to get a hearing.

It would be easy simply to refer to some quotations from the Old Testament that point up a social consciousness--"But let justice run down like waters, and righteousness as an everflowing stream," (Amos 5:24)--"But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself," (Leviticus 19:34)--but that is hardly getting at the matrix of the biblical message and is a bad attempt at "proof texting."

Few would announce a seminar in the local church on social justice and bill the first session as "Gleanings from Deuteronomy," an almost laughable circumstance in the light of the accessibility of the hottest paperback off the press from a conference held last month on church and society; and a lamentable circumstance because of our divorce from our biblical heritage.

Deuteronomy serves as only one example among many. It is flooded with humanitarian preoccupations, as well as political and social programs of reform which may well be potential paradigms for the twentieth century church. Deuteronomy avers that the prosperity or failure of the populace rests upon the populace, that justice is a synonym for gentleness and mercy, that the weak are to be protected by the strong, that Yahweh is the defender of the weak and powerless. (Deut. 24:14,15) It gives prescriptions for aiding the poor (Deut. 15:7,8; see also 23:19,20) and the incorporation of foreigners, indigents, levites, orphans, and widows into the family of Israel. Deuteronomy is persistently saying that mercy is above



legal justice. Yahweh is the Lord of history; he is Israel's only hope of salvation; Israel owes everything to him. It is in this spirit that each man must regard his neighbor. In this sense Deuteronomy sought to establish an equilibrium in society. Here is humanitarianism with its eyes fixed on the Almighty, not on man alone!

This perspective may be found in the book of Psalms as well. The psalmists affirmed Yahweh as the guardian of the social group, the defender of the oppressed, the refuge of the orphan; he lifts up the poor from the dust and raises the needy from the refuse heap (Ps. 10:14, 113:7-8), he lifts up them that are bowed down, releases the prisoners, and thwarts the way of the wicked (Ps. 146:8-9). As the psalmists exalt the faith of the exiles who are persecuted by pagans (Ps. 42:10-11, 120:5-7), they call those in distress to lead a life of piety, and they call upon Yahweh to deliver them from their enemies (Ps. 123). The sufferers are assured that God will hear the prayer of the humble and sustain them (Ps. 49:6-16). Yet, in the face of the prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 10:6, 11, 37:7,12, 14,16) there was a tendency to despair that Yahweh's justice will be realized (Ps. 13:2-3; 42). Even so, the psalmists were moved with new zeal to affirm that Yahweh's justice will one day rectify the injustice of the present world.

It seems one is at the threshold of the New Testament, but Deuteronomy and Psalms did not lead directly there. It remained for Christ to say with a life what the Old Testament had said with words. The difference the Christ-event makes is that the church's efforts at the establishment of justice must stand constantly under the judgment of the cross and pursued with eyes stayed on the Almighty. This alone can save the church from being merely another service organization and from smothering the transformation of the individual, without whom there is no society, beneath the transformation of unjust social structures (which must be transformed themselves by individuals and organizations composed of individuals).

The cross of Jesus Christ gives the nerve to the biblical ethic of justice. It is time to do our biblical homework, lest we have the nerve alone, or no nerve at all.



## THE LOVESONG IN THE GARDEN

Connie Leean

Come, let us go  
 You and I  
 As our lives are spread out before us  
 Like a banquet materialized upon a table  
 Need we hesitate -  
 Waiting -  
 Calculating -  
 The ripeness of time  
 Might reap rotten fruit

Who said, "But of this tree  
 You shall not eat"  
 Using a psychological ploy  
 Knowing full well man's weakness  
 Would the real temptor  
 Please stand up and  
 Identify his true nature!

To know evil  
                   (That is, knowing good)  
 Is to experience evil  
 Did I hear angelic voices?  
 Alleluias for Adam's initiative!  
 The Creator of all good  
 Rejoices in Adam's choice

Come, let us go  
 You and I  
 Into the world of light and dark shadows  
 Exposing the myth  
 Of black and white trees  
 Fearless of gray  
 Sensitive in love  
 Partners with the Creator in creating

## A POSITIVE NEGATION

Vern McCarty

A new student comes to the seminary in September with an interest in studying theology. Something in the past has led him to believe that study-



ing in a Christian seminary is a viable option in these troubled times. Then he is confronted by the extensive requirements in Hebrew and Greek. These two requirements are like two large and ugly pills which he must swallow in order to get his degree. In the process of getting these pills down, he is forced to neglect more relevant and interesting areas of concern, or he works just hard enough on these two requirements to pass them. He is told by a few that knowing these languages is necessary for an adequate theological education. But the irony of it is that not only a majority of the students but also a significant number of faculty members do not believe that this requirement is necessary for an adequate theological education. In the end he becomes impressed with the absurdity of it all. He is disillusioned with a seminary which requires all of its students to spend a significant portion of time on an area of study whose value is questioned severely by most members of its community. This picture is of course a caricature, but one which embodies much truth. In the following paragraphs I will try to explicate the problem more clearly.

I am not saying that the requirement is bad just because some people don't like it. The fact that a great number of people question the requirement, however, could serve as an indication that the requirement is not worthwhile for these students. This is perhaps an indictment of the students, eg. "The students are young, lazy, ignorant, and don't really know what is good for them." This could also be an indication, however, that the times are "a-changin'". Students can be led to the water, but we cannot be made to drink. If a student has a negative attitude toward a course and if his negative attitude is openly shared by large numbers of his peers and teachers, he is not likely to take the course very seriously or to learn much from it. This is especially the case when he is forced to take the course. From a purely functional point of view, therefore, these language courses are a waste of time for many students. Whether they should be a waste of time is another question. Obviously it is thought by the seminary authorities that these courses should not be a waste of time.

This brings us to a consideration of the rational reasons for maintaining the language requirements. The primary reason might be that such studies are necessary for the explication and interpretation of the scriptures: "One must know the original language if he is to discern the precise meaning of the specific passage." My answer to this argument is that it is left over from the dark ages, from the ages when there were not adequate commentaries. It is generally acknowledged that for the minister today commentaries and biblical dictionaries are sufficient to sustain him in his preaching and teaching activities.

A second reason might be that a student or minister needs to know the original languages in order to be able to deal with the difficult passages



n the Bible. My answer to this is that one year of study in a language is not enough to enable one to even begin to deal critically with a difficult passage. I have been told this by authorities in the field.

A third reason given is that study of the original languages contributes to an understanding of and appreciation for the culture and ethos in which the Bible was formed. This seems to be a worthwhile endeavor and the present courses do this to some extent, but again I would argue that a minute knowledge of the grammar of a language is not ultimately essential to gaining his understanding and appreciation.

Where do we go from here? My purpose in writing this article is more positive than negative; I am not criticizing this requirement just for the fun of it. Nor am I criticizing out of a feeling of personal resentment or failure, for I have virtually finished my language requirements and have done very well according to the given standards of measurement. Nor do I mean to question the competence of the teachers of language studies here at the seminary, since the quality of instruction seems generally to be good. My question is this: Can a Christian seminary justify requiring each of its students to spend a fifth or a sixth of his time on the study of classical languages? Are there not other courses of study which would better enable us to cope with the problems which exist in our society? If you ask me which courses, I answer that the students should be allowed to choose for themselves, as is presently the case with much of the curriculum. The language courses should be available for anyone who wishes to engage in such study, just as courses are available in Christian Ethics, sociology, and practical theology, for those who wish to concentrate in these areas.

At this point I must make it clear that I am not questioning the authority of the Bible. Nor am I questioning the need for men who specialize in biblical studies. Thanks to men who have concentrated in this area for more than one hundred years now, we can or should be able to build upon the foundation which they have laid so well. Will we "build on stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things" (Goethe), or will we stumble and fall? Will men a hundred years from today (if there be such a day) marvel at the rigidity and inflexibility of that dead institution which is the church?

Tradition can be a great blessing, but it can also be a great curse. In regard to this particular issue, it falls in the latter category. In the final analysis, the real reason we require these language studies seems to be because "these things have always been required. . . my father, my grandfather, etc." Doing a thing this way because it has always been done this way is not a reason but a rationalization. How long can we maintain ourselves in our ivory tower of tradition?



Traditionally, the WORD is the thing. The Word as heard and understood is the essence of Christianity, says tradition. And since the Word is contained in the Bible we must study each word of this book in the original language. But in our society today, is the Word trusted so much? Today action is the thing. Actions, not thoughts and pious utterances, are the ultimate criteria. Our churchmen, like our politicians have often lost their appeal and their effectiveness because they have talked too much and acted too little. Too many seminarians go out into the world, possessed by the illusion that when they speak the Word, great wonders will happen. But the world is a big, bad, ugly place in which magic seldom works. My point is that perhaps the intensive concentration on ancient languages is somehow related to a belief in the magical power of the Word.

Well then, you ask, even if we wanted to change this language requirement, how would we go about it? Many of the faculty members here at the seminary (and even ones who are against the language requirement as it presently stands), when asked this question, point "powerlessly" toward the General Assembly as the culprit which maintains the status quo: "It would be very difficult to get a change in the language requirement passed by that great body," they say with far-away looks in their eyes. They might also point out that the individual presbyteries are the ultimate authorities in this matter. But doesn't making such statements really dodge the issue? Is the purpose of the seminary to follow or to lead the church? Why couldn't the seminary serve as an innovator? Why couldn't the seminary offer a B.D. without required Hebrew and Greek? If the languages have to be required, let the individual presbyteries require them. Why couldn't the faculty members who oppose the requirement organize themselves and work actively toward getting the requirement changed or modified?

The students are getting restless. More and more students are becoming convinced that the requirement is absurd. Something must happen soon. It is time for constructive change in regard to this matter.

For the coming academic year we can foresee increased student unrest making itself known and felt. Maybe the incoming juniors need to be told about the problems which are to be encountered in this seminary in regard to language studies. Organized boycotting of required language courses might bring us closer to our goal. It could be that protest and resistance at appropriate times and places might be in order. But is all of this necessary? Is it desirable? Should students have to force constructive change to come about? We hope not.

#### SOME PARTING SHOTS

Howard J. Happ

One of the canons which I have tried to impress upon my editorial staff this year has been the necessity for an article to have some sort of unity. I am presently at some pains, however, to give even token recognition to that rule. I had planned to write a brief "Ave atque Vale" article, compounded of sentiment and sound advice, for this year's last Viewpoint, but now I want to present a brief reply to Vern McCarty's "Positive Negation". I have found a dubious solution to the problem by taking some of Vern's closing remarks as an occasion for making my long-rehearsed observations and following them with an objection to some of his principal arguments.



I had the misfortune to enter high school in the year of Sputnik. Consequently, I have always just missed participating in the post-Sputnik reforms. I have more than once been a member of the last class under the old curriculum, and by June I will for the third time have graduated from a school just as exciting things were starting to happen. Vern writes, "For the coming academic year we can foresee increased student unrest making itself known and felt." I think his prediction is accurate. In my junior year the atmosphere on campus was as colorful and stimulating as the interior of Miller Chapel. But things have been heating up over the past three years. More people have been daring to express themselves. Last year we still had to solicit articles for an occasional Viewpoint issue; this year our mailbox turned cornucopia.

I want to encourage what seems to be the trend. I want to urge more open expression of opinion, especially of dissent, on this campus. Serving as an editor for two years has made me realize how few of the opinions, especially the discontents, which a careful ear can pick up in the dormitories, ever make their way into the open forum of campus discussion. A large part of the student body still seems to need the illusion of consensus and to fear the reality of conflict. Witness the decrease of visible campaign buttons when RFK entered the lists against McCarthy. Witness the cells meeting behind closed doors but neglecting to carry out what their beliefs apparently require: the evangelization or anathematization of their neighbors. Witness the public discussion of student election candidates only in terms of competence, charisma, and constitutional defects, while in private hints are heard associating the competitors with different stripes of political or theological opinion. I hope that next year the real differences on this campus will be brought into open and explicit discussion, to be faced and dealt with. "Let a thousand flowers blossom!"

I would like to take my own advice, on expression of disagreement, if not on unity of composition, by raising one objection to Vern's negation of the language requirement. He points out, that with a plentiful supply of commentaries and cultural histories of Israel, we hardly need to know the original language to understand a Biblical text or to appreciate the historical situation out of which it comes. Nor does our scanty knowledge of the language come near enabling us to deal with really technical problems.

Against the above assertions, I would argue 1.) that language study can make existentially real what was only intellectually assented to, and 2.) that it can thus motivate us to consult English-language sources more effectively than a presentation of those sources alone would do.

I suppose each of us has at some time been embarrassed in class by making some entirely simple and obvious statement to which he had long given assent. Yet, somehow making the statement then and there made the truth more real and significant and full of implications than it had ever been before. My own experience is that study of the Biblical languages, particularly Hebrew, has had that sort of effect. I had been familiar with the hypothesis about the documents of the Pentateuch since at least freshman year in college. I could point out both Creation stories. And yet, the theory never became real for me until I encountered the breaks between P and J in the Hebrew. Since then I have had to struggle to conceive of Genesis in its present redacted form as one "book".

Similarly, there comes a point in learning any language, when one realizes that its words do not correlate exactly to the words and concepts of his own language, that no translation is really possible, especially where the spirit and sound of a literature is involved. This realization comes, at least faintly, fairly early in language study. The realization may not motivate one to mastery of the language; but at least one approaches



a foreign literature with a certain sophistication and discontent. As with much learning in the liberal arts tradition, the study of languages by the non-specialist may not lead to mastery of material or method, but it will at least produce a sharpened awareness of what one doesn't know. And that awareness will lead to a less complacent approach to the material and to a stronger desire to use secondary aids. The visceral experience of tangling with Hebrew creates an awareness of the problems of dealing with Scripture which an abstract discussion of exegetical problems can't produce.

### FISHING WITH A NEPHEW

Laird Stuart

There came what seemed a horseshoe day,  
 With sun kissed waves  
 And time to tempt the local fish.  
 Our bobbers danced and jerked  
 and mocked, for none would come.  
 I stayed,  
 But ~~he~~ with two-year sister beckoning,  
 Buried his pole beneath a rock  
 To keep it there,  
 And ran down the dock  
 To another world of trees and summer grass  
 Where trucks and sister waited.  
 True to hope  
 He came again  
 Back to the line where nothing was.  
 Later, past evening,  
 After a younger bed time,  
 I pulled our lines from the gossiping lake,  
 The dark water fell in chilled tears  
 From the hooks pale worm,  
 And inside  
 Behind the dock,  
 Hopes were dreamed  
 In a pillow's small hollow.

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